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ABSTRACT

While studies of school climate abound, conceptual frameworks have been ambiguous, and parent perceptions of climate are seldom considered. This paper describes a school improvement model employed in four rural Maine school districts in which (1) a school climate assessment is designed collaboratively with school staff; (2) the assessment is conducted and the results summarized; and (3) staff, citizens, and consultants review the data for purposes of plannning school improvement. Research was based on two premises: school climate as an empirical issue and the validity of school members' perceptions as sources and determinants of the learning environment. The approach involved several steps, including (1) consulting school staff about problematical aspects of school climate; (2) developing school climate instruments; (3) distributing and analyzing surveys; (4) reviewing results with school members; (5) pursuing selected findings; (6) generating multiple explanations for each climate condition identified; and (7) following up district action plans and evaluation efforts. Three lessons were learned from these successful consultations: (1) staff and citizens are receptive to survey results when involved in developing the instruments; (2) most school members are eager to read and discuss results; and (3) the staff development resulting from these steps often yields greater climate improvement than the action plan produced by the model. Included are four references. (MLH)

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Using school climate assessments: An approach to collaborative school improvement

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Studies of school climate abound. True to its novel status, the concept of school climate underlying these studies has often been neither clear nor congruous from study to study. Nevertheless, researchers have succeeded in establishing dimensions of school climate and their relationships with other constructs (Anderson, 1982). In most studies, surveys of students and school staff have provided the data (and thus the conceptual foundations) for analysis and application.

Surprisingly, parent perceptions of climate are seldom included in studies. This omission is unfortunate for three reasons. First, if it is true that school climate, in part, is a complex of the beliefs and perceptions of a school's primary constituents (Anderson, 1982), then any appraisal of school climate would appear incomplete without incorporating the perceptions of parents. Second, omitting parents from school climate studies precludes a useful comparison: the degree of congruence among staff, student, and parent perceptions. Third, the neglect of parent perceptions seriously hobbles efforts to use climate data for school improvement, particularly in those aspects of school life where parental attitudes and beliefs have demonstrated impacts.

For the past several years, the authors have been conducting school climate assessments in Maine schools that incorporate staff, student, and parent perceptions. Here, we describe a school improvement model that we have employed in which (a) a school climate assessment is designed collaboratively with school staff; (b) the assessment is conducted and results are summarized; and (c) staff, citizens, and we collaboratively review these data for purposes of planning school improvement.

To date, we have conducted school climate assessments and provided staff development assistance in four rural Maine school districts. Each district has included several elementary schools situated in small, scattered towns, and, in three cases, a high school located in the largest town in the district. The

districts were each notably decentralized with regard to curriculum and procedures. Each district voluntarily approached us for our assistance, inspired, in part, by recently passed state legislation requiring assessments for school improvement.

We have approached each district with two premises in mind. First, school climate is an empirical issue. That is, one can characterize the nature of a school's climate by conducting interviews and observations, administering surveys, and attributing to the resulting data a significant degree of validity. Second, the perceptions of school members are both valid sources of data about climate and important determinants of school climate (Miller, 1981; Watson, Crawford, and Kimball, 1985).

Consequently, our intervention for the improvement of school climate had three objectives: (a) to sensitize school members to the importance and utility of systematic data collection; (b) to help school members see their perceptions of school life as significant sources of data about school life; and (c) to help school members understand the complex ways in which their views, if consciously changed, can interact with other members' views and attitudes to change the quality of school life for everyone.

Our approach may be described as a series of steps.

Step One: Consult school staff to determine those aspects of school climate they regard as most problematical.

We meet with a group of school members (e.g., staff development committee, principals, interested board members). We present a brief overview of the school climate concept and describe existing instrumentation. We then conduct a series of discussions to identify areas of concern about the district's performance and environment. Indications of the priority of these concerns, as viewed both by school members and by staff at large, are recorded.

Step Two: Develop school climate instruments for the district.

We strive for a product that satisfies the needs of our clients and represents a broad sampling of climate dimensions. The instruments we employ in our climate assessments have been adapted largely from those developed by the Connecticut State Department of Education (Gauthier & Evans, 1983). The Connecticut items, or revisions of these items, provide the base from which we proceed in working with any one school or district. Additional items are included that reflect the specific concerns expressed by staff and citizens in the school or district in which the climate assessment is being conducted. For example, in addition to our commonly used items, a school group's concern about the value of schooling to their public led to the item, "What my child learns at this school will be useful to him/her in the future."

Separate forms are constructed for staff, students, and parents. Each instrument comprises statements regarding some aspect of the respondent's school climate. On a five-point scale, respondents indicate the degree to which the statement accurately characterizes school climate at their school.

While staff, students, and parents are administered different forms, each form shares a set of identically worded items. These "anchor" items permit cleaner and more meaningful comparisons among the three groups' perceptions than is possible where items are syntactically different across groups yet assumed to be parallel (e.g., Stavros & Moore, 1985).

Step Three: District distributes, administers, and returns surveys which are then analyzed and prepared in report form.

While we are responsible for preparing the final form of the instruments, school personnel are responsible for duplicating, distributing, and collecting the instruments. After we have received the data and have conducted preliminary analyses, we send to school members computer printouts containing frequency distributions for each item (for each of the three forms); staff, student and

parent frequency distributions for each anchor item; and means for each item cluster. (An item cluster comprises items that pertain to a common theme, such as principal leadership, student behavior, and community support.)

Step Four: School members meet to review results.

Our first task in this step is to sensitize school members to the climate data. We stress several points at these meetings. First, as outside consultants, we are not in a position to explain what the results mean for a particular school or district. Rather, the school members are the most qualified persons to speculate about meanings, causes, and implications. Indeed, their intimate knowledge of school and community are necessary to understand the particular conditions that might produce the climate profiles we obtain.

Second, we emphasize the "soft" nature of the data: These data are perceptions about the nature of things. Real or imagined, the concerns the data represent are important nonetheless, and constitute a valuable starting point for school improvement efforts.

Third, we demonstrate to school members how to "approach" the data for teasing out themes, contradictions, and possible policy implications. We use two fundamental strategies at this point.

Within-group, across-item analysis: First, we structure an exploration of the distribution of responses for each item on the instruments. Here, school members examine the percent of respondents (teachers, students, or parents) that generally agreed or generally disagreed with the statement in question. Building on the item-by-item analysis, school members then search for areas of convergence among various items for each group. For example, we found the following convergence among high school staff in one school we studied:

- "At this school, the teachers enjoy being around each other." (88% agreed)
- "I like being part of this school." (84% agreed)
- "Teachers from one subject area respect those from other subject areas." (88% agreed)

Areas of convergence similarly are sought for students and parents.

While the example above illustrates a positive convergence--i.e., the results suggest a healthy consensus regarding positive climate attributes--a negative convergence can prevail, as well. Consider the sentiments of one district's elementary students regarding the three items below:

- "Teachers and students respect each other." (33% disagreed)
- "Students can count on teachers to listen to their side of the story and to be fair." (39% disagreed)
- "When students are punished, they are punished fairly." (36% disagreed)

After searching for areas of convergence in the data, school members then look for contrasts that may be present in the data for each group. We define a contrast as a conflicting response pattern on pairs or groups of items that are conceptually related. From one high school's parents, for example, we found the following contrast:

- "When a child does something 'good,' the parent usually hears about it." (33% agreed)
- "When a child does something 'bad,' the parent usually hears about it." (74% agreed)

The contrast is striking: Parents report that communication is much more likely when involving possible misconduct on the part of their child than when involving good conduct. Such contrasts prove to be stimulating foci of discussion for school members.

Between-group, within-item analysis (anchor items): As we suggested above, including parents in climate studies permits comparison among staff, students, and parents. The most interpretable comparison is one based on identical items;

in our work, these are the anchor items. The number of anchor items in our climate assessments ranges from 15 to 20.

The anchor analyses are conducted along the lines of the analyses already discussed. That is, school members search for convergence (positive or negative) and contrasts. Here are two examples from elementary schools in the same district: The first conveys positive convergence, while the second signals a contrast:

- "The principal really cares about students."

staff:	4% disagreed	9% undecided	87% agreed
students:	12% disagreed	18% undecided	70% agreed
parents:	8% disagreed	15% undecided	77% agreed

- "This school makes students <u>want</u> to learn."

staff:	20% disagreed	20% undecided	60% agreed
students:	46% disagreed	28% undecided	26% agreed
parents:	22% disagreed	24% undecided	54% agreed

School members also are encouraged to break down their data by school. This, too, makes for interesting comparisons (and lively discussion). Consider the following example from two elementary schools in the same district:

- "Teachers in this school are proud to be teachers."

School A:

teachers:	21% disagreed	14% undecided	65% agreed
students:	14% disagreed	50% undecided	36% agreed
parents:	11% disagreed	28% undecided	61% agreed

School B:

teachers:	3% disagreed	9% undecided	88% agreed
students:	3% disagreed	17% undecided	80% agreed
parents:	5% disagreed	19% undecided	76% agreed

These data suggest at least two differences between the two schools. First, the unanimity of agreement among the three groups in School B signals that a striking difference in teacher work climate is likely to exist there when compared to School A. Second, the contrast between student perceptions of their

teachers is marked and carries with it implications regarding the learning environment of students.

These differences in school profiles raise some interesting questions for educators and researchers alike. For example, what is it that students "see" in their teachers that leads to a judgment regarding teacher pride? What does it mean vis-a-vis a school's climate (or its teachers' conduct) that half of the students are uncertain whether teachers are proud in this regard?

Step Five: School members meet to pursue select findings.

Here, we put the group to work listing and discussing what they deem "interesting and useful" results. In the cases of School A and School B above, staff members conferred at length over the "teacher pride" issue and its likely effects on children, on faculty morale, on community support, and on the administrative culture. These kinds of analyses generate high interest and fruitful speculation about the possible causes of the patterns each group sees emerging from the data. We ask each group to summarize their discussions on paper and these become the agenda for the next steps.

Step Six: Generate multiple explanations for each climate condition identified in Step Five, develop a consensus approach to influencing some of the supposed causative factors, and construct an action plan.

Again in small groups, school members move into the problem-solving phase of the process. They first brainstorm a list of practices and conditions in their school that they suspect are contributing to the aspect of climate with which they are most concerned. The list is then discussed at length to whittle it down to those aspects of the school that are most possible to address in the near term (but longer term aspects remain on the list to be retrieved in future meetings). Finally, the group commits to paper a plan for changing the patterns of practice in the school that they have chosen to address (we provide a standard action plan format). In one high school, for example, staff were

bothered by the fact that 43% of students disagreed that "students here respect one another." In response, the faculty developed five specific steps for the school community to take immediately to encourage different patterns of student interaction.

Step Seven: Follow through to see that the staff groups (a) pursue the action plans, (b) assemble to evaluate the effects of those plans, and (c) periodically revisit the data and their original lists to take up other concerns.

Our involvement in the four districts to date has formally ended with Step Six, leaving the crucial "action phase" in the hands of the groups that had originally engaged us. And this arrangement is as it should be. Though we have been eager to learn what may have become of the data, the excitement generated during analysis, and the action plans, the responsibility and authority to act on the school environment lies wholly with its members. At the end of our involvement, we made it amply clear that staff and citizens must persist with the plans developed during our sessions. Reports we have received from a variety of sources in the districts indicate that, in fact, actions have been taken and that, in the short term, staff and parent involvement in these efforts has created positive momentum. Sustaining a focus on the data for long-term climate improvement, however, has proven difficult.

Summary

Our assistance to the four districts has led to three lessons about the potential for successfully engaging school members in the use of school climate data. First, staff and citizens are receptive to survey results where they had a hand in developing the instruments.

Second, most school members were eager to read and discuss the results of their school's climate assessents. Indeed, they plunged into the task. Further, teachers, administrators, and board members proved very capable of

quickly identifying patterns in the data and postulating which specific school practices might be creating each pattern. However, this process is tiring and, if taken in too large a dose, tends to confuse and deflate staff. We learned that it need not be tightly structured and that the wealth of data needs to be used over a long period (more than one year) as a source for staff and citizen discussion and possible action.

Third, the staff development that results from these steps may in itself produce greater climate improvement than the specific action strategies that the program produced. These steps encompass a process of staff and citizen engagement. The data and the structure we provided focused school groups on immediate and important issues in their school environment. When a group found, for example, that staff, students, and parents alike rated teachers' academic expectations of students low, it galvanized them immediately into intense speculation about factors causing this perception and about improvement strategies. They not only left the workshop with a concensus for action, but they more importantly had developed a new and unified understanding of a key dimension of their school and their work.

Whether a single staff development experience can generate a change in the climate of a school remains uncertain. Our work suggests that an approach to climate improvement which treats school members themselves as the dominant influence in the constellation of climate factors appears to increase the chances. A collaborative assessment-to-improvement cycle seems to convince staff and citizens alike that they are their school's climate.

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